

October 30, 2022 Reformation Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46
Romans 3:22b-24, 28, John 8:31-36

[With lines from my own Reformation sermons from previous years.
Minnesota Council of Churches Sacred Sites Tours: <http://www.mnchurches.org/what-we-do/healing-minnesota-stories>]

Grace and peace to you, Beloved of Christ Jesus, grace and peace. Amen.

Our dog, Ace, came to our family in late April of 2020.

Remember that time?

COVID raged.

The lock down seemed to go on forever.

And we, like many, welcomed a rescue dog! Amen?

Ace is retriever, beagle mix,

friendly, but skittish at times, anxious.

He'd been through a lot, it seems, a whole lot, in his early years.

Who to trust? When to trust? How to trust?

Ace knew estrangement more than family, more than love, more than freedom.

Just days after arriving, Ace slipped out of his collar coming home from an evening walk.

He spent 12 nights exploring the neighborhoods, scavenging food,

hunkering down for a rest where he could, when he could.

We spent 12 nights putting up signs on the corners,

learning how to lay down scent trails that might lead him home.

Ace did come home, eventually, thankfully, and what a joy.

But trust takes time,

relationships are nurtured,

identity affirmed and clarified,

attachment grown.

So, 2 ½ years later, I was watching Ace this week at our local dog park.

It's a huge, fenced expanse that runs some four blocks along a railroad yard.

There's a nice mix of trees for exploring, and an open prairie where dogs jostle and play and run.

It's not uncommon for me to be walking on the far side of the prairie,

to give a little "Here Ace", "Good boy," to clap,

and for Ace to come bounding back to me, at me, with full speed,
free like the wind, and eager to be close, loved, known.

In the gospel this Reformation morning, we heard:

“If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The whole gospel of John, including this small section we read today, it’s all about relationship.
Relationship with God, relationship made possible through Jesus Christ.

Continue in my word.

Abide in my love.

Stay close to me, Jesus says.

For this relationship is life, the very life of life.

But relationship is hard and estrangement is real.

On our own, we forget our stories, our identity:

the cries of enslavement
the provision of years in the wilderness,
the helpful structure of the law and commandments,
the power and beauty of community.

On our own, we go astray.

Who do we trust? What is truth?

On our own, we forget the promise that in Jesus, death leads to life,
the end is the beginning.

505 years ago, our namesake, Martin Luther, began a debate.

It wasn’t intended to become a movement, a protest, indeed, the Protestant movement.

It wasn’t planned to create seismic shifts in the shape of the Christian Church or Western history
... but it did.

It began as discussion about the selling of indulgences,

about how eternal life is achieved
and about the practices of his own beloved Roman Catholic church of the time.

Martin Luther was a monk, a priest,

a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany.

He was raising questions of his own tradition, poking-the-the-bear, if you will.

Luther knew the estrangement of sin, of separation from God.

So he wondered, does grace, salvation, come as a spiritual gift of the Spirit, an act of Christ?
Or is it something that must be confessed, earned, or even paid for?

Sorting out his case, Professor Luther went back to Paul's letter to the people of Rome:

We all fall short of the glory of God, but Grace is a gift, a free gift, not earned.

It's from this place of Grace, offered in relationship, that we respond, that we live.

Relationship grounds us, and grace comes first.

Let me say that again: Grace comes first.

Instead of anxious and tangled hearts,

we can trust the promise of forgiveness.

Instead of fearing that the church would be corrupted by the world,

we are freed to act on grace,

we can engage the world's needs.

And the needs are many in this complex time, let's be honest:

We're not reducing our carbon emissions nearly enough to avoid catastrophic warming.

As we approach the midterm elections, democracy feels like it's hanging in the brink,

truth is hard to discern,

and violence and vitriol are all too real.

The people of Ukraine are under siege.

It's complicated, friends, very complicated, AND by grace we are called to stay engaged:

to learn, to act, to vote,

to pray, to listen and speak,

to grieve and to celebrate,

to give,

to make the phone calls, and bring the groceries,

to respond in decency and dignity, in strong and gentle love, Christ-like love

to reform (ah, reformation)

to reform our rhythms and routines so that others might live, so that the earth might live.

This afternoon I'm heading for the Sacred Sites Tour, sponsored by the Minnesota Council of Churches.

It's a chance to hear more Minnesota history from Native American kin.

We'll visit sacred lands, particularly "around the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota River,

the area the Dakota refer to as Bdote, or 'meeting place of rivers'.

Areas like Fort Snelling State Park,

the Dakota Internment Camp following the Dakota-U.S. War,
and the traditional burial ground by Pilot Knob Hill.

This is one step for one day, one response to grace,

Did you catch that?

Not a response to guilt, but a response to grace.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, grace comes first, and we respond.

Take a breath, a deep breath....

Be still and know that I am God.

We are reformation people, dear ones: reformed, and still reforming.

Trusting a God who writes new covenants, new promises on our hearts, yesterday, yes,
but also today, and even tomorrow.

Nostalgia can stir us—the hymns, the reads, the readings.

But even more, let us, Church, be stirred by the Holy Spirit's power,

stirred by the truth that our God over and over and over again re-forms us in God's image,
re-covenants with us and the whole creation,
re-imagines this audacious call to be God's people in the world.

I think of our dog Ace, and his full throttled run at the sound of his name.

That's grace, to me.

Ace knows who he is, and now, finally, he knows whose he is.

Baptized, we live.

On this Reformation Sunday and every day:

By grace we are saved, healed and made whole,

not by our performance, not by our smarts,

not even by our good and just works,

but by grace alone, God's grace.

And let the people say Amen!